

The writers of *Critical Insights: The Outsiders* began our project in 2017, the year S. E. Hinton's first published novel turned fifty. Like Hinton herself, many of us waxed a bit nostalgic about a book from our past, one we read in our youth, probably at about the age when Hinton wrote her famous book. Now looking at *The Outsiders* as adults, we find it richer than we did when we first read it, filled with themes and concepts we missed when we found it just "a really good book."

Laurie Adams wrote much of the background material on the book's author, as well as researching the bibliographic material, works by and about S. E. Hinton. Because Ms. Adams' educational background is in the field of criminal justice, her Historical Background chapter, "Lawyer Up, Ponyboy: Reconciling Delinquency Outcomes in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* with Trends in Modern Juvenile Justice," explores the legal issues, especially crime and punishment, that the characters in *The Outsiders* might have faced in the mid-1960s and what they might face under similar circumstances today.

Lana A. Whited and M. Katherine Grimes in the Critical Reception chapter look at what critics said about the novel when it was first published, again on the book's fortieth anniversary, and on *The Outsiders*' recent semicentennial. Both Dr. Whited and Dr. Grimes have also written additional essays for this volume.

Dr. Whited's major field of study is twentieth-century British and American literature, and recently much of her writing has been about novels for children and adolescents, works including the Harry Potter and Hunger Games series. For this volume, she has written an essay about parallels among *The Outsiders*' narrator, Ponyboy Curtis; the narrator and titular character of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; and Stephen Daedalus, the protagonist of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; her essay is

called “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Greaser: *The Outsiders* as *Künstlerroman*.”

In the essay “S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* and Theories of Moral Development,” Dr. Grimes combines her study in English with her undergraduate work in psychology, using the research of psychological theorists Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan to examine the moral maturation of the novel’s major characters.

Jake Brown’s Critical Lens chapter entitled “‘You greasers have a different set of values’: Othering, Violence and the Promise of Reconciliation in S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*” looks at the concept of binaries in the theories of Jacques Derrida, whose ideas Mr. Brown explains as clearly as possible—not an easy task. Mr. Brown is also the author of “‘It’s like being in a Halloween costume we can’t get out of’: Identity and Authenticity in S.E Hinton’s *The Outsiders*,” an essay exploring the way Ponyboy defines himself as both a member of a group and a stranger within it.

Julia Hayes, whose primary field of specialization is African American literature, explores the ways that the characters in a short story by James Baldwin and S. E. Hinton’s first published novel cope with hardships. Both works examine relationships between or among brothers, with both the joy and the anguish that can permeate those kinships. The title of Ms. Hayes’ Comparative Analysis chapter refers, perhaps ironically, to a comment by Cherry Valance about the difficulties of being a Soc: “‘Things Are Rough All Over’ Indeed: Suffering and Salvation in James Baldwin’s ‘Sonny’s Blues’ and S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*.”

Robert C. Evans has examined and compiled excerpts from numerous interviews with S. E. Hinton, providing the reader with her descriptions of writing and publishing *The Outsiders*, her reasons for writing the novel, and her views on the book and the movie version decades after the publication and filming. Dr. Evans’ essay, entitled “S. E. Hinton on *The Outsiders*: A Compendium of Interviews,” also quotes some of Hinton’s advice to up-and-coming writers.

Sarah E. Whitney’s essay “‘I’m going to look just like him’: S.E. Hinton’s Young Adult Novels and the Fraternal Lens” looks

not just at *The Outsiders* but at Hinton's other published novels: *That Was Then, This Is Now*; *Rumble Fish*; *Tex*; and *Taming the Star Runner*. Dr. Whitney focuses especially on male characters' interactions with brothers; surrogate brothers; and even, in her latest young adult novel, with a girl who acts as a surrogate sibling.

Mary Baron discusses three poems by Robert Frost in relation to Hinton's novel. In addition to "Nothing Gold Can Stay," which, of course, features prominently in *The Outsiders*, Dr. Baron writes about "The Oven Bird" and "The Road Not Taken," especially as they apply to choices that Ponyboy Curtis makes and lessons he must learn. Her essay, entitled "Robert Frost's Seasons of the Self in *The Outsiders*," uses the poet's own explanation that he writes about nature not just as something to be observed and enjoyed but as a force that helps us understand ourselves.

Michelle Ann Abate's journal article "'Soda attracted girls like honey draws flies': *The Outsiders*, the Boy Band Formula, and Adolescent Sexuality," reprinted in this volume from *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, explains how the descriptions of the characters in *The Outsiders* match the appearances of members of popular 1960s bands. Examples in Dr. Abate's essay sometimes read like teen magazines of the time.

Paige Gray is the author of two essays in this book. The first, "Greasers and Gallants: Writing Realism, Romanticism, and Identity in *The Outsiders*," examines the role of Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* in S. E. Hinton's book, especially in the ways the boys view themselves and in what they aspire to be. Dr. Gray's essay "'You've seen too much to be innocent': *The Outsiders*, the Myth of American Youth, and Young Adult Literature" explores the way that most adults, especially adult writers of literature for adolescents, view young people as innocent, while S. E. Hinton, a teenager herself at the time she penned *The Outsiders*, exposes the truth behind the façade of innocence.

Mária I. Cipriani in the essay entitled "Gold and Magic—Ponyboy Curtis and Harry Potter: Binaries, Hierarchies, and Privilege" explores the ways that *The Outsiders* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* reinforce male and female

stereotypes, as well as the presumptions that maleness is superior and that heterosexuality is the norm. Dr. Cipriani sees both novels as reflecting society's opinions about these issues and presenting the ideas as though they are instructive.

The breadth of topics that the essayists represented in this book explore is impressive, as are the depth of research and richness of critical thought. All of these speak to the importance of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in helping to shape the psyches of American youth and young people from around the world, as well as the necessity for more mature readers to interpret the deeper themes of the novel.

Lawyer Up, Ponyboy: Reconciling Delinquency Outcomes in S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* with Trends in Modern Juvenile Justice

Laurie Adams

I often lie awake during the wee hours of the morning, staring at cracks in a white, concrete ceiling, pondering my life. Every crevice inspires a thought, every thought a memory; thus, an introspective journey begins, guiding me through scenes resembling an S.E. Hinton novel.

(Robert Pruett, Texas death row inmate executed October 12, 2017 for a secondary offense after initially being given a ninety-nine year sentence as a fifteen-year-old.)¹

S. E. Hinton has mentioned on numerous occasions that she could not write *The Outsiders* again and couldn't have done so even in her early twenties after she had matured beyond her high school experiences and observations (*Great Women Writers*). Her rationale is that she could not have recaptured the intensity of teen emotions and all-or-nothing angst with the same immediacy and conviction as she had at sixteen, but there are other compelling reasons why the book might not have been able to be written at a later point. Given changes to the legal realities surrounding juvenile offenses, *The Outsiders* almost certainly could not be written in its original form in the twenty-first century.

From a criminal justice point of view, *The Outsiders*' plot includes outcomes that would be out of sync outside the time period in which the novel was written and very much at odds with the realities of juvenile justice as it exists in the United States today, not to mention the expectations of readers who have witnessed the outcomes of various forms of delinquency and violence in media or their own communities, or both. *The Outsiders* could not be written today without substantial changes to outcomes for various forms of juvenile delinquency depicted in its plot, given changes in the

criminal and juvenile justice systems over the course of the book's fifty years of continuous publication, and given readers' increased social awareness of and exposure to criminality through media or personal experience.

Four major changes have come about since *The Outsiders*' 1967 release: the increase in minors being tried as adults, the increase in American litigiousness in pursuit of civil suits, the proliferation of privatized correctional facilities, and the institution of three-strikes laws. All of these point to far different outcomes for Ponyboy Curtis and his friends were *The Outsiders* to take place in a modern setting.

Getting Reacquainted with *The Outsiders*

The Outsiders takes place in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and was written to reflect the late 1960s surroundings of its author. S. E. Hinton had grown up in a “greaser” neighborhood (Smith), where most of the families were working class or not quite working class, and teens from her community often found themselves at odds with or outright targets of the wealthier kids from across town, whom Hinton refers to as “Socs.” *The Outsiders* timeline runs quickly—the action in the novel covers the span of only a few weeks, though the book refers to the deaths of the Curtis boys' parents eight months before the events of the story take place.

In *The Outsiders*' Tulsa, the greasers and Socs mostly stick to their own neighborhoods unless meeting up for a rumble, although as in the episode that sets the tone for the remainder of the book, the Socs sometimes cross their territorial lines to jump a random greaser for fun and to make sure greasers know their place. The greasers do the same, to settle scores (S. E. Hinton 48).

The greasers are headed by twenty-year-old Darrel (Darry) Curtis. The older brother of narrator Ponyboy, Darry is the straight arrow of the group. Darry avoids trouble at all costs, primarily out of fear of losing his underage brothers to the foster care system, and works two jobs to make sure they can pay their bills and stay together. He nevertheless is bound by a sense of loyalty to his group, participates in their rumbles, and is aware of his friends' illegal activities without reporting them. The last element might make

him an accessory after the fact, or possibly guilty of obstruction of justice.

Sodapop Curtis is the sixteen-year-old middle brother, who very much follows Darry's lead. A high school dropout due to low motivation, distractibility, and poor grades, Sodapop also works to support the family and selflessly anticipates continuing to do so in order to put Ponyboy through college when the time comes. Sodapop charms his way through the book with good looks and an engaging personality, being the brother who is more sympathetic to Ponyboy. Like Darry, he'll answer the call of his gang and not report their law-breaking behaviors and he generally steers clear of legal trouble.

Ponyboy Curtis is fourteen, grappling with the deaths of his parents, and he can't stay out of trouble even when he's engaged enough in the present moment to realize that it is about to befall him. An attack on Ponyboy by the "Socs" at the beginning of the book that establishes the high stakes and suddenness of the violence that can be visited upon teens from his neighborhood whose only fault is existing on a lower socioeconomic rung than their tormentors. For Ponyboy, though he never deliberately incites it, violence in *The Outsiders* occurs with the rapidity and lack of warning of a teenager's mood swings. A deep thinker and good student, Ponyboy rumbles alongside the older greasers; isn't above using a weapon to scare off a would-be attacker; sneaks into movies without paying to keep up with his crowd; and, when hard pressed, resorts to breaking and entering when he and Johnny go into hiding.

Dallas Winston is the gang member with the longest rap sheet and the only one of Ponyboy's crowd to have had experience with actual New York City street gangs. Apart from unspecified criminal priors, Dallas indulges in theft and vandalism, and he is absolutely an accessory after the fact for aiding and abetting Johnny and Ponyboy when they skip town after the death of Bob the Soc. He later engages in simple assault by threatening nurses with a switchblade, battery in the rumble afterward, and armed robbery after Johnny Cade's death. In and out of jail (with a first arrest at age ten), seventeen-year-old Dallas is the greaser furthest along on his way to becoming a career criminal.

Johnny Cade is sixteen, meek and unassuming. He rumbles with the group but doesn't seek out fights as some of his peers tend to do. He runs away from home frequently to avoid his parents' abuse and neglect. Johnny kills in defense of Ponyboy when the two boys are set upon by a group of Socs. He brandishes a knife to fend them off, saving Ponyboy from being drowned in a fountain, but fatally stabbing Bob (the leader of the Socs) in the process. Johnny and Ponyboy go on the lam and break into an abandoned church building for shelter.

Keith "Two-Bit" Mathews and Steve Randle round out the group. Apart from Ponyboy's assessment that Steve "fights for hate" and his propensity for stealing car parts, very little about Steve stands out. He is mostly defined by his annoyance at Ponyboy for tagging along and Ponyboy's dislike for him. "Two-Bit" is a cheerful no-gooder with a penchant for shoplifting, cracking jokes, and flashing switchblades.

The Socs, including presumptive leader Robert "Bob" Sheldon, Randy, David, and Paul Holden, are mainly guilty of fighting and underage drinking—though their fights sometimes come close to beating their victims to death. Johnny Cade is the victim of such an attack by the Socs when he's caught out alone in an empty lot where he'd gone to practice football kicks.

With this background in place, readers are given to understand that several members of Ponyboy's group, as well as the Socs, are not only moderately to seriously delinquent, but that they're repeat offenders with no plans to alter their lifestyle—what the criminal justice system would view as incorrigibles. At the end of the book, both groups are battered, scarred, and minus at least one of their number (Johnny through a horrible accident, Dallas through self-destruction, and Bob through Johnny's defensive act). However, all the boys are almost miraculously absolved of legal culpability for their latest and most serious skirmishes. This is the point at which the text might fall apart for editors with an eye toward realistic criminal justice outcomes in fiction, as well as modern readers who weigh the lack of legal ramifications of the group's acts against what they may personally be aware of through media or experience.

It might be tempting for readers to imagine that the changes to the criminal and juvenile justice systems that have come about since 1967 have built up slowly and incrementally to the current day, but that is not what happened. Major changes came in fits and starts, sometimes pushed equally by political expediency and perceived public need. Key pieces of legislation, including the Omnibus Crime Bill and Safe Streets Act of 1968, The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 and 2002, and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 have shaped the juvenile justice system as we know it today (Regoli and Hewitt 9). The Omnibus Crime Bill and Safe Streets Act set aside money for research grants aimed at developing new and more effective means of juvenile corrections (“Omnibus”). The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 and 2002 required that juveniles be removed from adult facilities, forbade detention in a juvenile facility for “status offenses” including running away, drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, and other minor infractions, and set aside funds to improve existing juvenile justice programs (“Juvenile Justice Reform”). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, among other things, set rules for trying juveniles as adults for violent crimes and participation in violent street gangs (“HR3355”). Those laws, as well as others that were adopted at the state level, meant that over time, *The Outsiders*’ depiction of juvenile contacts with the justice system slipped further and further from the realism for which the book was lauded.

***The Outsiders* vs. Trial as an Adult**

On their way to the rumble with the Socs, Ponyboy’s gang sing and joke about being juvenile delinquents. Considering the laundry list of their various infractions, that’s a fairly self-aware assessment—but crimes committed by an underage person don’t necessarily end in juvenile detention.

During the 1980s, lawmakers began to adopt a “get tough” approach to juvenile crimes in response to increases in the crime rate, a perception of youngsters as smugly confident of their immunity from serious legal consequences, and a perception of the

punishment of juveniles as too mild to be effectual (Bernard and Kurlychek 155). Had this ‘get tough’ approach been represented in *The Outsiders*, this alone would have led to one or more of the characters’ facing more serious, possibly adult consequences.

By 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act had set guidelines for trying youth as adults. While this legislation was aimed at curbing urban youth involvement in serious street gangs, it could certainly have been applicable to members of Ponyboy’s neighborhood gang, given the repetitive nature of their criminal behaviors. In 1996, First Lady Hillary Clinton addressed the perceived need to push further to address gang activity at Keene State College, saying, “They’re not just gangs of kids anymore; they’re often the kind of kids that are called ‘super-predators.’ No conscience, no empathy. We can talk about why they ended up that way, but first we have to bring them to heel” (“1996”). This language sounds very much like Ponyboy’s description of Dallas Winston, Tim Shepherd, and the Brumly greasers, “Young hoods who would grow up to be old hoods” (S. E. Hinton 117). Arguing for legislation that would encourage more states to try juveniles as adults for violent crimes, Florida Republican Representative Porter Goss exhorted his peers to act, saying, “Our youngest career criminals are getting away with the most heinous crimes over and over again, and it’s not just gang warfare Wake up!” That bill, known as The Juvenile Crime Control Bill of 1997, ultimately died in the Senate, but not before passing in the House of Representatives with the support of 209 Republicans and 77 Democrats (Gray).

Throughout the 1990s, several states made changes to their laws regarding the status of sixteen or seventeen-year-old offenders that excluded them from juvenile court and tried them instead as adults. In its publication *Juvenile Justice Reform Initiatives in the States 1994–1996*, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention noted that juveniles were sent to adult criminal court for nonviolent as well as violent offenses:

Of the small number of juvenile cases waived to criminal court, more nonviolent offenders were waived than violent offenders. Nonviolent

offenders comprised 66 percent of all juveniles waived to adult court in 1992, according to [the General Accounting Office]. (“Juvenile Justice Reform”)

Crime control and being tough on crime in general were planks in most politicians’ political platforms at that time because safety sells and allows otherwise partisan voters to meet in the middle. There often appeared to be an effort on the part of liberal and moderate politicians to prove they would be as tough on crime as their conservative opponents if elected, and campaign rhetoric was heavily slanted toward crime control throughout the 80s and 90s, to the degree that elections could be won or lost because of it. *Mother Jones* reporter Patrick Caldwell noted in an article detailing former Vice President Joe Biden’s history with the movement toward mass incarceration in the United States, “As crime rates spiked across the country, Democrats adopted a harsh tough-on-crime posture. Yet few pushed the issue quite as hard as Biden.” Caldwell notes that Biden’s “career-defining victory” was the passage of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which he had helped to clear the Senate with the support of 188 of his fellow Democrats (Caldwell).

The get-tough mentality and the push to stem the tide of youth crime, and thereby crime overall, meant that by 1997, as author Elizabeth Hinton writes, “all fifty states had laws on the books allowing children as young as ten to be tried as adults” (E. Hinton 241). Today, estimates put the yearly number of juveniles prosecuted as adults across the United States at around 250,000, with as many as 10,000 juveniles being housed in adult correctional facilities (“Key Facts”). The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 and 2002 forbade juveniles from being housed in adult prisons, but that protection does not extend to juveniles tried as adults. At most, *The Outsiders* refers to the possibility of brief stints in jail, but certainly never years or decades in adult prison other than potentially for Johnny and Ponyboy after Bob’s killing. Cavalierly singing about holding up gas stations makes far less sense in a contemporary context when arrest for armed robbery could result in the character’s spending half his life in prison.

In 2005, the Supreme Court’s *Roper v. Simmons* decision ruled that those under the age of eighteen at the time they committed capital offenses were not eligible for the death penalty (Regoli and Hewitt 470). In 2010, *Graham v. Florida* held that minors prosecuted as adults for crimes that had not resulted in a death could not be given life sentences without parole (Agnew and Brezina 19). In 2016, the *Montgomery v. Louisiana* decision effectively ended mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles. Even with these rulings, spending the majority of their lives behind bars is a very real possibility for youngsters tried as adults, hardly the slap on the wrist juvenile justice was perceived to be in the time period leading up to the “get tough” era. *The Outsiders* simply doesn’t go far enough in the legal outcomes it presents for juvenile offenses despite its characters’ worries about jail or boys’ homes. A realistic book that involves juvenile contacts with the criminal justice system would have to reflect the gravity of spending decades—if not life—behind bars.

The Outsiders vs. Three Strikes

The relationship among politicians, the media, and the public is dynamic and fluid, with pressure exerted to change the behaviors of one of those entities also potentially affecting either or both of the other two. Throughout the 1990s, changes to juvenile and criminal justice were taking place at the federal and state levels, and beyond those previously mentioned, another type of legislation began to catch on with lawmakers seeking to assure the public that every possible measure was being taken to curtail crime. It was dubbed the “Three Strikes and You’re Out” law.

First adopted by Washington State in 1993, the concept quickly took hold elsewhere. Though there was some variation amongst its iterations, three-strikes laws generally meant that a third arrest and conviction after one arrest and conviction of a felony would result in a maximal prison term for the current conviction, plus an “enhancement” of five years for each prior felony conviction. Michael Vitiello of the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law notes that three-strikes laws began their rise, paradoxically,

at a point when the number of incarcerated persons had trebled from the previous decade and crime rates had begun to ebb (395). Vitiello says despite the reduction, “most Americans felt more vulnerable to violent crime than they did a decade earlier. At a time when crime rates were declining modestly, politicians in several states seized on the fear of crime as a powerful political issue” (395).

Three-strikes laws, and the dynamics among politicians, the media, and public that led to their passage, are important here for three reasons. First, they provide another example of modern law that would lead to far different outcomes for *The Outsiders* characters if the story were being written realistically today. Second, the interplay of media, political figures, and the public which led to their passage created a condition referred to as moral panic. This is relevant because moral panic is an extreme example of the building of expectations amongst the public for outcomes within the criminal justice system. Third, it is important for the reader to understand that public expectations are better informed than ever, given the fact that most Americans are almost never separated from their media sources via their smart phones, the Internet, the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and social media. Whether their expectations are accurate (much like the crime rate confusion in the early-to-mid 1990s) is another matter: public expectations of outcomes for criminal behavior exist. These expectations respond to input from political and media sources, can cause pressure to be exerted on media and government for answers and remedies, and can be manipulated for gain by both media and politicians.

This is sufficient reason to conclude that it is reasonable to factor in such public expectation of outcomes when weighing whether *The Outsiders* could be written the same today. Within *The Outsiders* universe are several characters (Two-Bit, Dallas, Steve Randle, Tim Shepard) who could theoretically be charged with felonies for their crimes, tried as adults, and become subject to three-strikes-law enhanced sentencing. Those outcomes would probably not seem strange to contemporary readers and would read as more believable than the book ending with several of the characters having no contacts with law enforcement at all.

Works by S. E. Hinton

Books

The Outsiders, Viking, 1967

That Was Then, This Is Now, Viking, 1971

Rumble Fish, Delacorte, 1975

Tex, Dell, 1979

Taming the Star Runner, Delacorte, 1988

Big David, Little David, Doubleday, 1995

The Puppy Sister, Doubleday, 1995

Hawkes Harbor, Tor, 2004

Some of Tim's Stories, University of Oklahoma Press, 2007

Screenplays

Rumble Fish, Zoetrope Studios, 1983

The Outsiders, Television Series Zoetrope Studios, 1990

“Pilot,” 1990

“The Stork Club,” 1990

“Only the Lonely,” 1990

“Breaking the Maiden,” 1990

“He Was a Greaser, Only Old,” 1990

“Maybe Baby,” 1990

“Storm Warning,” 1990

“Mirror Image,” 1990

“Carnival,” 1990

“Tequila Sunset,” 1990

“Winner Take All,” 1990

“The Beat Goes On,” 1990

“Union Blues,” 1990

Fan Fiction

Hinton has acknowledged, but not identified, an unknown number of fan fiction posts. At the 2009 *LA Times* Festival of Books, Hinton admitted she enjoys writing fan fiction of her own work and joked to fans searching fan

About the Editor

M. Katherine Grimes is professor of English at Ferrum College. She earned a PhD in English from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, an MA in English literature from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a BA *summa cum laude* from Catawba College in English and psychology. Dr. Grimes contributed to *The Ivory Tower and Harry Potter: Perspectives on a Literary Phenomenon*, edited by Lana A. Whited, and coedited, with Dr. Whited, *Critical Insights: The Harry Potter Series*. Her work on J. K. Rowling's series has also been published in *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths*, edited by Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney.

Dr. Grimes is interested in maturation literature, especially works with absent mothers and those that show moral development. She is currently writing an introduction to literary studies and a couple of picture books.